



Public Dialogues Executive Summary

A. Background

In June 2003, the Maryland Commission on Environmental Justice and Sustainable Communities (EJ Commission) initiated a series of Public Dialogue Sessions to provide a forum for citizens, community organizations, neighborhood groups, and local leaders to offer advice and direction to various levels of government on environmental policies and processes that may have an impact on minority and/or low income families throughout Maryland. The Public Dialogue Project's goal was to conduct four Public Dialogues in geographically diverse areas of Maryland and submit a final report back to EJ Commission by the end of December 2003.

B. Summary of the Public Dialogue Sessions

In October and November, 2003 the EJ Commission held four Public Dialogue Sessions in Baltimore City, Cumberland, Landover, and Easton. Turnout for the Public Dialogue Sessions varied from approximately 25 participants in Cumberland and Easton to more than 100 in Baltimore. Severe thunderstorms limited the turnout at the Prince Georges County Dialogue Session and the EJ Commission may consider rescheduling a Public Dialogue. However, several local Prince George's County groups submitted comments for this Report by e-mail and by telephone.

The Public Dialogue Sessions prompted a wide variety of comments and suggestions. Community participants are supportive of the EJ Commission's focus on "sustainable economic growth" and providing incentives for investments in low income and minority neighborhoods. Participants were especially interested in learning more about Brownfield redevelopment programs and the newly announced Environmental Benefits District program.

As anticipated by the EJ Commission, some of the most contentious comments at each Dialogue Session were related to permit applications for prisons, landfills, and other facilities that are currently before MDE. Many of these comments addressed the interplay of local zoning decisions and MDE permit decisions; the "fairness" of the public hearing process; the extent to which local governments will accept "tradeoffs" of land use decisions in exchange for economic development and jobs; and how county governments might take steps (such as enact a county ordinance) to address specific environmental problems.

Finally, the Public Dialogues identified a number of new issues, including the problems that many small, rural, and low-income communities have with failing sewage collection and treatment systems. Public Dialogue participants suggested that these small system sewage discharges pose a major threat to the health of the Chesapeake Bay.

C. Summary of Recommendations from the Public Dialogue

Sessions

Section IV of this Report contains Recommendations for the EJ Commission for 2004 activities based on the comments received during the Public Dialogue Sessions. These Recommendations are consistent with and/or build upon the EJ Commission's December 2002 recommendations while recognizing current budget realities. ***Four Recommendations focus on the expansion or modification of existing EJ Commission priorities:***

- **Continue to Establish the EJ Commission as an Official Forum”**

The information gathering and disseminating role of the EJ Commission should be continued and enhanced in 2004. For example, the EJ Commission’s web site should be expanded to include other state and local agencies and the Commission should continue to hold forums or Public Dialogues with community groups in 2004.

- **Continue to Integrate EJ into State/Local Planning**

The EJ Commission should take practical steps in 2004 to formalize its relationship with county zoning, county planning, county health, and county environmental officials.

- **Complete the Environmental Indicators Tool**

The completion of the “Environmental Indicators” data-gathering tool should remain a focus for the sub-committee workgroup in 2004. The EJ Commission’s focus should remain on providing additional incentives for economic development in communities with environmental justice concerns.

- **Expand EJ Training Programs**

The EJ Commission should continue its efforts to train and sensitize staff on the background and purpose of programs to address environmental justice interviews. However, MDE should also provide “media” or “public speaking” training for MDE staff

Two Recommendations would require significant changes to the 2002 EJ Commission priorities:

- **Make Economic Development Projects a Focus**

The Environmental Benefits District (EBD) initiative has begun to fulfill part of the “vision for economic development in Maryland” that is sensitive to environmental justice and community concerns. The EJ Commission should advocate the rapid design and implementation of 2 - 4 EBD pilot projects in 2004.

- **Improve the Public Participation Process**

One simple step the EJ Commission could take in 2004 is to request that MDE make it easier for interested citizens to receive a notice of a proposed permit. In addition, The EJ Commission should consider other participation process improvements such as whether the public participation requirements of the Brownfields program should be applied to other permits in the Air, Waste, and Water Divisions.

Three Recommendations propose new EJ Commission priorities:

- **Small/Rural System Sewage Treatment Initiative**

The EJ Commission should take steps in 2004 to determine whether there are a large number of failing small sewage collection and treatment systems in rural Maryland as suggested by Public Dialogue participants. The EJ Commission should also task a sub-committee or workgroup to develop a sewage system technical assistance and training program for local officials.

- **Project Based Enforcement Initiative**

The EJ Commission should launch 2 - 4 coordinated enforcement campaigns in low income or minority neighborhoods based upon the successful program completed in Baltimore in 2003.

- **Expand Community Outreach/Training**

The EJ Commission and/or MDE should devote more resources to extensive outreach to community groups in 2004 to facilitate dialogue with low income and minority families.

D. Summary of the Project & Contents of the Report on the Public Dialogue Sessions

The Public Dialogue Project consisted of four phases. **First**, in July and August 2003, Public Works, LLC held discussions with more than 25 key staff and management from the MDE and US EPA as well as several members of the EJ Commission. The purpose of these discussions was to: 1) identify how environmental equity issues arise in the day-to-day operations of MDE and other state and local agencies; and 2) identify potential participants and invitees for the Public Dialogue Sessions. **A Summary of the MDE/EPA Interviews appears at Section II of the Report.**¹

Second, Public Works worked with MDE agency staff and local officials to conduct outreach for, prepare materials for and develop a format for each of the Public Dialogue Sessions. The handout materials and the format of each Public Dialogue Session varied depending upon the anticipated turnout levels and the issues of interest in each community. Although there was a very limited budget for advertising, MDE staff and EJ Commission members were able to generate better than anticipated attendance at three of the four Dialogue Sessions. The November 5, 2003 Prince George's County Public Dialogue Session's attendance suffered from severe thunderstorms and a tornado watch in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties that evening.² **Copies of the handouts prepared for the four Public Dialogue Sessions appear in Appendix A of the Report.**

Third, Public Works helped to facilitate the Public Dialogue Sessions in Baltimore City, Cumberland, Landover and Easton. Public Works also prepared and circulated summaries of those Dialogue Sessions for comment. Where possible, these summaries included testimony or proposals submitted by local citizens. Several attendees provided additional details and comments on these draft summaries. **Copies of the final summaries from each Public Dialogue Session appear in Appendix B.**

Fourth, Public Works developed a list of common environmental justice themes and issues that citizens expressed in all of the Public Dialogues. Some of the environmental justice themes and issues from the Public Dialogue Sessions were anticipated based upon the internal interviews described in Section II of the Report, but several unanticipated issues emerged from the Dialogue Sessions. **The list of common environmental justice themes and issues appears in Section III of the Report.** Finally, Public Works developed a series of Recommendations to address the environmental justice themes and issues identified during the Public Dialogue Sessions. **The Recommendations on how best to address the identified environmental justice issues appear at Section IV of the Report.**

¹ Public Works greatly appreciates the assistance provided by Kristina Golden, Michelle McFadden, Jalonne White, Jim Richmond and Bill Schmidt of MDE who helped schedule the internal MDE interviews and assisted with outreach and invitations to the four Dialogue Sessions. In addition, many thanks to the Alliance for the Chesapeake which assisted with outreach for the Eastern Shore Dialogue Session.

² The EJ Commission may schedule an additional Public Dialogue Session for Prince George's County. In the meantime, Public Works has been interviewing citizens groups and local officials from Prince George's County to identify the environmental justice issues of the greatest interest in that region of Maryland.